

PROGRESS REPORT ON THE NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT TEAM (NET) PROGRAM June, 2006

In January of 2006, the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) released a report on their 2005 evaluation of the City of Rochester's Neighborhood Empowerment Team (NET) program. The report suggested a series of recommendations for the new Mayoral administration to consider to improve the program, as well as four structural options for the future. Mayor Robert Duffy directed that the CGR report be used as a guide in making operational improvements; at the end of one year, he would re-evaluate the program's progress and make a decision on its future.

Upon the release of the report, NET staff held a series of three public forums to update the public on its findings and solicit input and feedback. Comments and suggestions were integrated into this program update.

Background

The NET program has been a controversial one, particularly over the past few years. Inconsistent management, lack of a unified mission, poor coordination between departments, overemphasis on enforcement, little staff support, and increasing external pressures have combined to create a stressful workplace in which customer service can get lost in the drive to meet basic neighborhood demands.

Factors Affecting NET's Perception and Performance:

- The Center for Governmental Research report noted that NET cannot be all things to all people; yet it is expected to solve day-to-day problems as well as overall quality of life issues in the neighborhoods.
- NET is generally supported by residents and neighborhood organizations; disliked by landlords and business owners. There are some inherent conflicts between these groups and NET is squarely in the middle. Residents tend to want strict and aggressive enforcement; landlords and businesses do not.
- NET is often the “front line” between residents and City Hall. It can serve valuable customer service and accessibility functions that otherwise may not get performed.
- Code inspection and enforcement are mandated City services. There is value to inspectors who know the neighborhoods and the residents, landlords and business owners in each.
- NET relies on other departments for service and can be frustrated by real or perceived treatment as “just another customer.”

NET Changes and Accomplishments to Date:

- Four of six new Area Administrators have been appointed, with significant leadership emphasis on customer service and accountability;
- An internal evaluation of inspectors and office personnel has been completed, and a subsequent training plan to resolve inconsistencies has been implemented*;
- All civilian staff have completed conflict resolution training through the Center for Dispute Settlement* and are scheduled for comprehensive customer service training;
- Two new administrators have started New York State Building and Fire Codes certification training (a year-long program; other new administrators will take training next year)*;
- NET participates in regular meetings with the departments that provide services to improve communication, streamline procedures*;
- NET office hours have been extended; each office is open one evening a week to improve access to services*;
- Administrators now perform one random customer follow-up call per inspector per week to assess skills, improve customer service;
- NET partnered with the Department of Environmental Services on the successful completion of Rochester's Clean Sweep program;
- NET has shared responsibility for the planning and development of the lead poisoning prevention program, including proactive communication with property owners, realtors, and advocacy coalition.

Third and Fourth Quarter Operational Goals for NET:

- Using Mayor Duffy's Vision, Values and Guiding Principles statements, finalize mission statement: *"NET will support safe, clean, viable, and attractive neighborhoods by locating City code inspection, advocacy and neighborhood policing services in neighborhoods so that City staff, residents and investors can work as a team to reduce urban blight, nuisance, and criminal activities"**;
- Using the Rochester by the Numbers program, begin collecting meaningful performance measurements so that the impact of NET can be accurately evaluated*;
- Using the 311 system to be implemented City-wide, completely standardize the call intake and tracking process to ensure the prompt response and resolution to citizen complaints and inquiries*;
- Review enforcement procedures to determine their effectiveness while considering incentives, other proven strategies to increase voluntary compliance with City codes*;
- Implement handheld electronic tablets for all code inspectors to improve accuracy, save money in records management activities*;

- Implement Mayoral changes to Certificate of Use program, to be released by 7/1/06;
- Successfully implement lead poisoning prevention program with current staffing levels;
- Improve NET communications, including Web site, neighborhood newsletter, and revise procedural communications for clarity, tone;
- Explore formal relationship with the Center for Dispute Settlement for neighbor-to-neighbor mediation;
- To ensure cross-training, diversity and balance, re-assign inspectors and administrative staff between NET offices;
- Using City-wide survey, evaluate customer satisfaction with NET*.

***CGR report recommendation**

Summary

NET has moved quickly to address many of the structural and operational issues identified by neighborhood stakeholders and by the Center for Governmental Research report to improve accessibility and accountability, and has taken a proactive role in engaging neighborhood representation for administration initiatives such as Clean Sweep. NET will continue to focus on streamlining processes and improving customer service while implementing new initiatives, including the lead paint poisoning prevention ordinance. Challenges remain as neighborhoods continue to struggle with criminal activity, high unemployment rates and poverty, and residents continue to turn to NET to help with a wide range of day-to-day problems. NET staff remain committed to our role as City government's front-line in supporting safe, clean, viable, and attractive neighborhoods.